THE WHO INTERVIEW

Starburst: When you became Dr Who, were you worried about being type-cast? Baker: I don't think you think about those sort of things when you're mixing cement. (laughs) At CET a week, you don't think about it. You just long for anything at all.

Starburst: The pressure of the Dr Who shooting schedule must be tremendous. Baker: There are massive redeeming features. One is that one gets rather well paid for it - and I can't over-emphasise that (laughs). But the thing is that it is also terrific fun to do, you see. Because it's a big licence to have an awful lot of fun and be fantastical, which you...

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couldn't possibly get in... I mean, the real thing that worries me is how I would make the transition from the freedoms and fun I've had on Dr Who to something 'real'. Because you get very heavily influenced by the style of the work you do, like anybody. I've noticed I'm actually now totally obsessed with the

Opposite centre: Graham Williams receives his Starburst Award at the Fantasy Film Convention last year. Below: The Doctor and Sarah (Elisabeth Sladen) face a horrifying vegetable masterpiece. The Kravall. Right: The Doctor in the official robes of a Time Lord.

fantastical area of comedy and improbability. It's true. I'm absolutely obsessed with the improbable.

Starburst: That's not a bad thing, is it? Baker: It's a very good thing at the moment, because that's entirely what my life is about. But I sometimes wonder at the thought of what will happen when I work with some 'serious' director who's saying, "Now, two inches to the left, Tom". I couldn't do an emotional scene for him, looking into a looking glass.

Starburst: You're in the position now of creating your own framework and using your own imagination to play the part the way you want it. A lot of licence.

Williams: The situation's even more unique, because Tom not only can bring those elements to the part but has to. We are utterly dependent on the individual actor's portrayal of that part.

Baker: Also, you can, if you're positive, help the directors in some ways. (different directors direct different stories.) I think the only week-by-week link so, when a new director comes in and says, "This will be the set-up," I'm the only one who can actually in detail remind him that the footnote before we actually duplicated the same setup. I know a lot about set-ups in corridors and stopping on corners (laughs). And irrational reasons for stopping. That's the lovely alchemy of being an actor. You turn this very difficult stage direction into some kind of...

"The character of The Doctor was always me. Was always Pat Troughton. Was always Jon."

dramatic goal which it doesn't actually inherently contain. The reason why we stop on corners is because we've run out of corridor. (laughs) We can't do long tracking dialogue shots. And the reason why I actually sometimes go on my knees is because, when the camera pans there, the camera's only that high. You can't do high shots because you'd be in the lights. All these things are very funny to do. If you establish a good working relationship with your (production) office, you become more than just The Actor trying to bring his expertise. You actually become very involved. And, if that's in predicting what the companions will be, inventing their characters and still leaving room for development is rather positive, it's a massive bonus. I'm licensed by our office - by Graham, who employs me, and the directors. I've built up relationships with (laughs). I mean, occasionally they send me for tea to shut me up. But they actually put up with me trying to influence the thing because most of them, I hope, do believe that it's an attempt to help and to make it fresh and new.

Starburst: Have you actually changed the character of your Doctor over the years? Baker: I don't think so. I think finally, in this sort of thing, you're only filtering the personality. Because of the inability to develop (due to audience resistance) it's not in the strict way an acting part - that it can be surprising or radically different in any way. It was always me. It was always Pat Troughton. It was always Jon (Perceval).

Williams: The more difficult side of it from our point of view - the scripting side before we even start the season - is
more difficult. Once you’ve got Tom in the show, you can really leave the part in his hands, given that we don’t present him with too much of a load of garbage week after week. We try and help him in that way. But helping the companions is that much more difficult because they come into the whole thing, obviously, with a tense and nervous attitude. Because they know it’s been running such a long time and Tom has worked his way into the part and made it his own. And it’s continually difficult to support them as well. Sometimes we can do it successfully; sometimes we have to depend on them rather more than we’d like to. Lalla Ward is doing a smashing job this year and Mary (Tamm), given the parameters of the role last year, did a super job.

Baker: Given fundamental expertise from the producer downward, the real gold of the thing is the formula. Given that you haven’t got a bonehead at the top or a powerful subservient somewhere down the line, you can work with it. There’s the first reason why we are so successful — the very first reason — is that we are incomparable. Nothing admits to comparison with Dr. Who. When people try to plagiarise our situations or our attitudes, they fail down because it is an obvious piece of plagiarism. They don’t really start with this marvellous thing that the character’s alien and the wonderful heroic comedy-thriller notion that he can travel in this dark box. That’s why I think the formula, which is so wonderful, engages such a huge audience.

Starburst: Especially children.

Baker: Sometimes I enjoy being recognised, especially by children. It gets very debilitating when you’re accosted by adults all the time. But children — I love it, especially if I’m on the move. Going home from work on the train last night, I made three tube changes and all the kids were coming back from (The Great Children’s Party) in Hyde Park with their mothers and everything. They were so dexterously packed and I was threading my way through and, quite often, a child is actually being led towards me and he recognises me and he smiles and then he wonders why he smiled. And then it clicks (who I am) and by the time it’s noticed this and enjoy it, I’ve talked to hundreds of parents: they enjoy this. The moment you actually get children that attention — just like, indeed, adults — you get this marvellous response. When our music comes up and the opening music to Dr. Who is absolutely wonderful — that’s the signal for the weekly sit-down and the sharing; and young Toby’s behind the sofa or the little girl’s on her dad’s knee. The thing is very enjoyable for an ordinary family.

Williams: There used to be that same thing with the classic children’s serial on a Sunday afternoon. I think that’s gone now, because they keep on swapping times around. They’ve destroyed that loyalty which certainly my generation grew up with — watching Lorna Doone, followed by Treasure Island, followed by... Baker: And, to be fair, the slot the BBC has kept for Dr Who over the years, more or less...

Williams: Within twenty minutes... Baker: It’s a brilliant slot. People’s metabolism changes in the week, doesn’t it? One feels different on a Monday to what one feels on a Friday — and on a Saturday night particularly. It’s sort of anticipation night. Even if you’re going to stay in, you hope that the phone’ll ring or the wine’ll be good or you’ll be in good form. All the sport is over. The news headlines have gone and no-one’s got to get up in the morning.

“...in its first week The Incredible Hulk knocked off more than 2 million viewers.”

get to the pub that early. It’s a suspensory hour. And when you think of the programming — certainly the season before last — when it used to run Basil Brush, Dr Who, Generation Game, Duchess of Duke Street, Two Ronnies, Starsky and Hutch, Match of the Day — it was simply drivel. How can you programme. Who was going to switch over?

Williams: It’s got to be a compliment to the programme that London Weekend in particular spends thousands and thousands and thousands of pounds trying to knock it out of those ratings.

Baker: Well, that one space... Williams: Space 1999!

Baker: Right. That knocked out in its slot about four weeks.

Williams: Even more spectacular was when they put The Incredible Hulk against us. In the first week, it knocked off more than two million (viewers). In the second week, it made no impression at all. They put it on another day and it went to number two (in the ratings).

Starburst: It was interesting that Bruce Forsyth’s Big Night failed against Larry Grayson’s Generation Game. Baker: That’s a good example in that the formula of The Generation Game was as big as the presenter. Given that the person is charming and warm, anyone can do it. In Dr Who, it’s been done four times. The people who remember Bill Hartnell think God, that was absolutely wonderful. Then Pat came on and there was a barrage of criticism for him playing this daft fellow with a pipe. But suddenly bang — and he was in. He goes, Jon comes in all of a glitter. He did it. Then I come in, the absolute antithesis of Jon. My judgement’s not so wonky that I’d ever mistake me for the formula.

Williams: I’m in exactly the same situation. The only real error I could have made and I hope I haven’t made so far would be to try and have the programme compete on other programmes’ terms. If we went into a massive amount of model work and fantastic locations and huge sets and vast expense, we’d just be aping their shows. We’ve got such a unique situation — that’s our mother lode and that’s what we’re going to keep on digging away at. Let the others fight out amongst themselves for the best model shots or the best scenery.

Baker: It took fifty minutes of television to transform my life, I was totally unknown. In fifty minutes over a fort-
night — two episodes — I was a national figure. And, after about seven episodes, the hostility of the audience not liking the change ended and suddenly it was: "Hey! He's very funny, isn't he, Dad? Look at those big eyes he's got!"

Williams: The comparatively small amount of critical letters we get are from people of our age who, having grown up with Dr Who over the last 15 years, say: "Well, it's not like it was 15 years ago," Well, it's not because they're not what they were like 15 years ago. It's so much more sophisticated now, so much more intellectual and complicated. Have a look

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in your newspaper at Christmas and see all those stocking-fillers: CALCULATORS SUITABLE FOR SIX YEAR OLDS AND ONS, I mean, when I was six I wasn't having anything bigger than an abacus — and even that was a bit complicated. It's only the (script) vehicles that have changed: the way in which one explains things.

Baker: And also the tools. Every other week, we're hiring new equipment.

Williams: If we were to put on now the same effects we were using 15 years ago, the audience would feel cheated. You've got to make some effort to keep the magic going.

Starburst: Outside the studio as well as inside?

Baker: Well, a successful actor in television is licensed by the character he plays. If Stratford Johns — I don't know him — but if Stratford Johns is in an alehouse and someone comes up to him and says, "Are you Barlow?" and he says, "Yes, I am," and they say, "Can I have your autograph, please?" and he says, "Get lost, I'm drinking with my friends," then I think the general reaction would be: "Great! He's just like he is on the telly!" Now, you see, I've licensed only to be benevolent. So I have to put up with people — and I do, willingly, because in no situation that I can imagine would I

disappoint anyone because it's usually about children. So, even though the fellow be the biggest bore in Europe, I've got to put up with him. I'm only licensed to be benevolent and amusing. So I can disappear without an explanation.

Somehow or another, that's acceptable because people really don't want actors — the big figures that entertain us — to be like us. I don't think we do, any more.

When, sometimes, I hear stories about very big actors I admire — about their tastes or their behaviour — I'm frequently disappointed because, while it makes good gossip, it annihilates preconceptions. I don't want to know that some actor's only lift Jim or that he's insufferably rude. It impinges on my preconceptions, which are happy preconceptions.

Starburst: All because of journalists.

Baker: There are these guys all over the place in the press and in magazines actually phrase-making, intellectualising. Williams: Some of the most uncaring criticism we've ever come in for, I think, has been at the hands of the fans themselves. The really biting criticism, that I don't think even the hardest-nosed pro would stoop to — in the most petrifying terms — is from the fans, usually aged between 18 and 20, who put pen to paper and are insufferably pompous and patronising about a particular episode.

Baker: I don't know what the age-group is, but there's a group of fans who become so proprietary about the formula and the star that they become...

Williams: It's when they say so-and-so's performance this week wasn't quite as good as last week but we do realise that the BBC makes these programmes under tremendous pressure and...

Baker: The other assumption these partisan fans make is that they assume that I, as the actor who's at the front, am as interested and pre-occupied with science fantasy or science fiction as they are. I meet people who read off these titles or they ask my opinion about certain things and they obviously know more about the history of the programme than I do. Because I'm not really — except in the informed way of not subverting anything — interested very much in what Pat did or Jon did. We're playing it from absolute moment to moment, holding on by our fingertips with the pressure of time and money and everything.

Williams: I mean, you and I only keep marginally in the back of our minds what we did last year...

Baker: Yeah.

Williams: Let alone five years ago or ten years ago.

Baker: Not interested in that.

Williams: The audience aren't very interested in that either.

"What the fans are conceding is that they don't understand actors and programme-makers."

Baker: What those fans are conceding is that they don't understand actors and programme-makers. What's in the past is in the past. Each one you try to make history with — THIS ONE IS THE BEST ONE.

Williams: If we stuck religiously to points of continuity, of what we'd done before, the series would still be exactly where it was 15 years ago. You can't change a programme over-night. I don't think any audience could be expected to wear that — it wouldn't be fair on them. But, I think, in my years with the show, the changes we've made have been quite significant. It's only changed 15 or 20% a year, so it's still within the acceptable framework of the programme, but nevertheless it's moved on.